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ABSTRACT

The Cornerstone Project was developed to build a strong foundation for urban adolescent student learning through staff development and student leadership development. This report summarizes its implementation and objectives and considers the responses of students and teachers. The program was developed at the Martin Luther King Law and Public Service Magnet School, Cleveland (Ohio). Enhanced student achievement at the school was the ultimate expected outcome. Thirteen de facto student leaders (students recognized as leaders with behaviors that educators considered negative) and eight leaders by virtue of election to student office (de jure leaders) were recruited for leadership training. Fifty-five teachers and counselors participated in one orientation and nine professional development workshops. Outcome and process evaluations examined both components of the program. Half of the de facto leaders completed the program. Students had been selected because of their degree of disengagement and influence over their peers, and these very qualities made working with them difficult. Outcomes of the professional development component were positive, with positive teacher reactions to the workshops and the facilitator. Lessons from the project are being used to build on its accomplishments and to strengthen professional development and student engagement. (Contains one figure and one reference.) (SLD)

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Research Report #14

The Cornerstone Project: Building a Foundation for Urban Adolescent Learning

by

Martha de Acosta

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This project was called the Cornerstone Project[1] to denote our goal: building a strong foundation for urban adolescent learning. The two components of the project which formed the cornerstone were staff development and student leadership development. This report summarizes the implementation and outcomes of the Cornerstone Project and considers its origins, goals and objectives, the extent to which activities were implemented, and how the project was experienced by teachers and students. The findings are based on project documentation and self-reported student and teacher outcomes. The project evaluation presented in this report assesses the project outcomes in a manner sensitive to the changing conditions of the district and the school. Recommendations and options to build on the Cornerstone Project are offered.

Origins of the Project

Collaborative Planning of Program Design and Implementation

The idea for the program originated with the administrators who were, at the time of the project, principal and assistant principal at Martin Luther King Law and Public Service Magnet (MLK). These administrators saw a need to make the school environment more supportive of the academic achievement and social development of the urban adolescent of our times. The two administrators met several times with the research scientist of the Urban Child Research Center and a licensed clinical social worker who has expertise in adolescent development to plan the program design and implementation.

Turbulent District Environmental Conditions Impacted Project Implementation

The implementation of the Cornerstone Project was significantly affected by the school district's central administration's measures to address the financial crisis of the Cleveland Public Schools. The need to make more efficient use of school buildings resulted in (1) staff and student concern that the school would be moved out of the building, which affected teacher and student morale during the last months of the 1994-1995 school year; and (2) the addition of a middle school to Martin Luther King Law and Public Service Magnet in the fall of the 1995-1996, which created challenging working conditions in the building.

Project Description

Goals and Anticipated Outcomes

The project had two complementary goals: to build a learning community that fosters adolescent development and to develop student leadership at Martin Luther King High School. Enhanced student achievement at MLK was the ultimate expected outcome. The immediate expected outcomes were to:

- Increase faculty and staff understanding of adolescent development in the urban culture of the nineties;
- Improve teacher motivation to work with students;
- Improve the academic initiative of negative leaders;
- Develop a cadre of student leaders who can continue to participate in school improvement activities.

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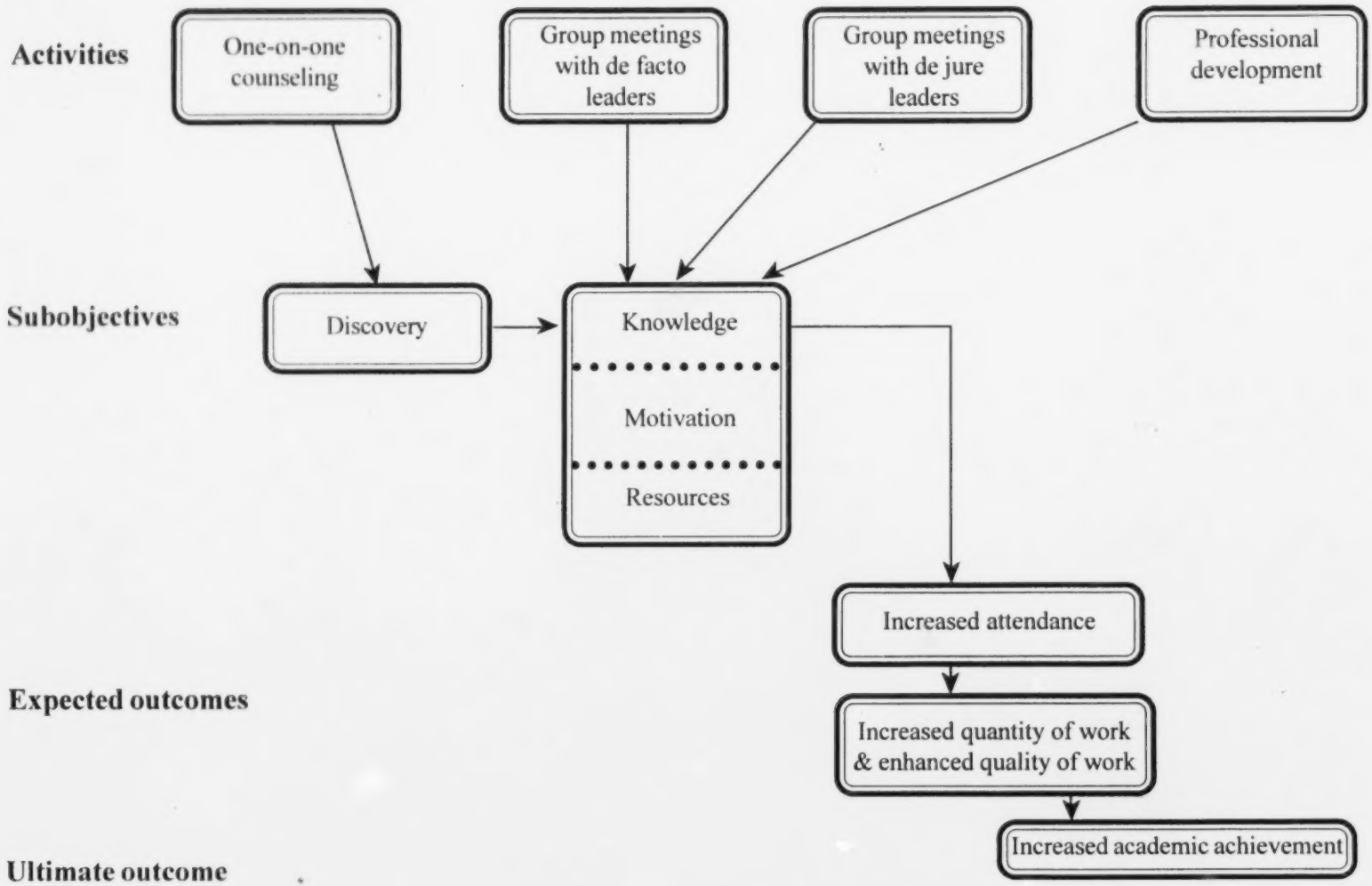
[1] This work was supported by grants from the Martha Holden Jennings Foundation and the Cleveland Foundation.

Project Design

Achievement of the expected outcomes depended on changes in student and teacher behaviors. Three kinds of activities were planned to that effect: (1) one-on-one counseling of students; (2) group meetings with students; and (3) professional development workshops for teachers.

Because the project was aimed at changing behavior, intermediate subobjectives of discovery, knowledge, motivation, and resources were necessary. An important first subobjective for both students and faculty was *discovery*. For instance, *de facto* student leaders—students who are recognized as having influence or power based on behaviors that educators consider negative—needed to discover what elements of the school environment triggered their negative behaviors. *De jure* student leaders—students occupying positions of influence in student government—needed to become aware of what *de facto* student leaders could contribute to the school community. Staff needed to discover why some students were not achieving in school and how to relate to them in new ways that would motivate them. *Knowledge* was a second subobjective for students and faculty because both needed to learn about their school environment, peers, and students in order to work effectively with them. *Motivation* to change was the third subobjective; no amount of knowledge changes behavior unless there is an incentive to change. The fourth subobjective was *resources*; behavior changes required resources such as time and structured opportunities for dialogue and reflection. Figure 1 depicts the program design.

Cornerstone Project Design



Participants

Students

Thirteen *de facto* student leaders and eight *de jure* student leaders participated in the leadership development component of the project. The thirteen *de facto* leaders, about two-thirds of whom were male and one-third female, were selected by the principal and assistant principal; the eight *de jure* leaders, all but one of whom were female, were recruited from among students holding positions in student government.

Staff

Fifty-five teachers and counselors participated in one orientation and nine professional development workshops. Half of the teachers attended three or more workshops, and three out of ten attended five or more. A diverse group of teachers, experienced and new, African-American and white, male and female, and representing the school's various academic departments, attended the workshops.

The Student Leadership Component

Phase One, aimed at building the foundation for working with students, was completed by the spring of 1995. Activities in this phase consisted of group meetings and one-on-one counseling. From the first week in February to the end of the school year, the *de facto* leaders participated in one-hour meetings with the program facilitator/social worker, twice a week. Average attendance was about six students, but it ranged from ten or more students on certain days to only three on others.

The students were invited to assume the role of valued experts on student behavior and perceptions. The sessions gave them the opportunity to discuss what they wanted the administration and the teachers to understand about them, and to elaborate on the signs teachers should look for in a student who is trying to change his or her ways. Considerable discussion centered on *de facto* student leaders' behavior in the classrooms and in the hallways, what triggered those behaviors, and how they could change them. The facilitator also worked to persuade the *de facto* student leaders to collaborate with the *de jure* student leaders.

Fifty-seven hours of one-on-one counseling sessions, conducted by the program facilitator, were held with the *de facto* student leaders. The facilitator and students addressed issues that were affecting the lives of the students and together they considered options for improving their school achievement.

The facilitator oriented and worked with eight *de jure* leaders. Two meetings were held exclusively with the *de jure* leaders, while six others were joint meetings with the *de facto* leaders. Average attendance of *de jure* leaders was five students. The facilitator discussed with the *de jure* leaders the nature of the projects both groups of students might collaborate on and moderated discussions of the *de jure* student leaders' views on student-teacher relations and student-student relations.

Phase Two, aimed at developing relationships between the two student groups, began concurrently with Phase One. The *de facto* leaders, however, did not begin to accept the idea of working with the *de jure* leaders until April. Early joint meetings between the two groups were aimed at building trusting relations between them.

Phase Three, aimed at a collaboration of the two groups started in May, turned out to be shorter than planned because of the late start of the project and the need to convince the *de facto* leaders to be a part of the collaboration. *De facto* and *de jure* leaders collaborated in the preparation of a high school dance and in a presentation to teachers at one professional development workshop. Students presented their points of view on issues such as motivation for work, classroom dynamics, and successful practices teachers used to encourage them to work.

Professional Development

One orientation session and nine professional development workshops were offered to teachers and staff after school. In close consultation with a group of teachers actively involved in most of the school's committees on school improvement, the topics for the workshops were tailored to the needs of the faculty. Workshops focused on understanding adolescent development and conflict; communicating with today's teenagers, with attention to techniques for communicating with hard-to-reach students; motivating students; the importance of relationship building with students; and developing relationships with hard-to-reach students. The history of the school and the disruption caused in the fall of the 1995-1996 school year by the addition of a new school were dealt with in the workshops as well. Specifically, the ways students and teachers dealt with change and how that affected learning and teacher-student relations were also addressed. The workshops were facilitated by the program social worker.

Other opportunities for professional development were made possible by the project director's participation in the Cleveland Collaborators for Positive Education Network, a project funded by the Joyce Foundation. The project director participated in the planning of a schoolwide professional development workshop that invited teachers to express themselves about, and reflect upon, the changes that the school had undergone. Responding to an interest expressed by teachers, the project director introduced a core group of six faculty members to action research as a tool to monitor the changes they were introducing in their classroom. She continued to work with the teachers after the project was completed as they used action research for professional development. Finally, six Martin Luther King teachers and the school principal participated in a luncheon with Dr. Lisa Delpit, the thought-provoking educator who has made teachers rethink how they "teach other people's children." All these activities are steps toward expanding the community of learning at Martin Luther King School and empowering teachers to take ownership of their professional development.

Evaluation

Both the outcome and process evaluations closely followed the evaluation plan described in the proposal. The evaluations assessed the progress made toward meeting the proposed objectives, documented project implementation, described the changing place of the project in the school given a number of unforeseen developments, and took note of students' and teachers' perceptions of the project.

Outcome Evaluation

The Student Leadership Component

The program had positive effects on the *de facto* student leaders who were exposed to it.

While these outcomes might appear modest to an outside observer, they are positive when weighing the relatively short duration of the program intervention against the severity of the problem, as suggested by these students' recurrent violations of school rules, repeated sanctions given to them, and to the extended length of time these students had been disengaged from schoolwork.

Those *de facto* student leaders who remained in the program reported increased engagement with the school. Some students participated in the planning of a high school dance, others in the efforts to keep their until-recently-not-valued-school in its home building, and some students made presentations in a professional development workshop. Teachers' views about the project's impact on students were divided. A small number of teachers, who opposed weekly meetings with *de facto* students, argued that the project was rewarding bad behavior by giving these students additional attention. A larger number of teachers reported to us that some of the *de facto* students were doing better academic work. They also talked among themselves about the effect of the program on students. One teacher brought the model that one of the *de facto* student leaders had made for the Ohio Invention Convention to one of the professional development workshops to show her colleagues an example of the positive outcomes she was noticing.

In addition to the group meetings, *de facto* student leaders met with the social worker for one-on-one counseling sessions that allowed *de facto* student leaders to deal with issues they did not want to deal in front of other students. The facilitator reported that the students sought him out to talk with him, some parents called to ask that their children be helped, and several students became more cooperative after the one-on-one sessions.

The collaboration of *de facto* and *de jure* student leaders resulted in their making new acquaintances and sharing points of view on the school, schoolwork, and relations with teachers and staff. As a result *de jure* leaders indicated that they had changed some of their negative views about the *de facto* leaders. For instance, one student commented that she did not know that one of the *de facto* students was "so bright", and the *de facto* student leaders were surprised to find that they shared some common perspectives on ways teachers relate to students and styles of teaching they disliked.

Both student groups felt most teachers did not care about them. In their view, teachers should "spend more time with the students," "use humor," "have a good attitude toward students." They also agreed that often students misbehaved because classes were boring.

Professional Development

Professional development was aimed at increasing teachers' awareness of the ways issues related to adolescent development affect teaching and learning. Furthermore, the workshops were aimed at increasing their knowledge of these issues, particularly what urban adolescents in the '90s value, how they relate to adults (teachers in particular), how they relate to their peers, the process of becoming reengaged with school, student perceptions of classroom life, and strategies teachers can use to better relate to and communicate with students. Other desired outcomes of the professional development workshops included increasing teachers' motivation to introduce behaviors that would positively impact their students, and providing some resource material about how to create a caring classroom. On average, seven out of ten participants indicated that they valued the information they learned from the facilitator, and eight out of ten valued the

perspectives presented by their colleagues. Seven out of ten participants rated highly the amount of learning experienced in the workshops. Many teachers described increased knowledge about students and about other teachers as the most valuable outcome of the workshops. Many others told of their motivation to try some of the strategies learned at the workshops, such as *reframing* and *active listening*. Three-quarters of the participants thought that the workshops met the needs of the teachers and nine out of ten concluded that the professional development workshops were relevant to their work setting.

In early workshops, some teachers found that the views expressed in the workshops were dissonant with their own. They indicated that their role was to teach a subject to the best of their ability and they were not open to addressing issues of relationships with students. A turning point for many teachers was hearing students, who presented at one of the workshops, clearly articulating their perspective on learning in the school. Practically every teacher was surprised to hear the students say that they felt that "the majority of the teachers in the building don't care about students." Teachers thought that being conscientious about how they taught subject matter would tell the students they cared about them; students said they needed more. Hearing the students voice feelings of being unattended to motivated some teachers to try to establish more caring relationships with their students. One teacher said "[I] need to show myself as a caring and enthusiastic teacher," another noted "I am more dedicated to improve my teaching and make it less boring." This was a turning point for many teachers who also wanted to know what students thought their responsibilities as learners were. Students listed paying attention, coming to class and being prepared, studying, and being respectful as their responsibilities.

Teachers' working conditions affected their expectations for the workshops. Working in real time in classrooms, where events demand immediate attention, teachers wanted the workshops to give them concrete solutions and outcomes. One teacher questioned "Will this workshop raise more questions than it answers?" The workshops did raise questions because teachers needed to rethink their customary practices, but the series of workshops building on what was learned in the previous sessions provided greater depth of understanding about teacher-student relations and allowed teachers to continue to discuss what they were trying out in their classrooms and to gather more information on what their colleagues were trying. Developing some topics for more than one session and carrying some themes throughout the whole sequence of workshops helped to strike a balance between teachers' requests to treat topics in more depth (which required more time for each workshop) and the many demands made on their time after a full day of teaching.

Process Evaluation

The process evaluation documented how the project was implemented. Data from each of the program components were analyzed and events that affected project operations were assessed.

The Project's Life Cycle

The project's life cycle was affected by a delay in securing funding which impacted events taking place at the school. The proposed starting date for the project was November. Due to the difficulty in finding additional funds to match the challenge grant, the project did not start until

February. This delay in the planned start-up of the Cornerstone Project proved to be a significant drawback, since the life cycle of the project did not coincide with the school year cycle. Students and staff experience the school year in relationship to grading periods. Start-up of the project in November would have introduced the project activities during the first grading period. The Cornerstone Project started in February placing some of the activities planned to change student attitudes in the last grading period, when students felt it was a time for winding down.

Delay in start-up of the project led the project staff to adjust the activities timeline, devoting more time to working with the students than with the teachers in order to complete the student component by the end of the school year. Fewer professional development workshops for teachers were held than had been planned during that period, knowing that more workshops could be offered over the summer. This decision, although it allowed an efficient use of time, did not make teachers full participants in the project from the start. As a result, some teachers viewed with disfavor our work with *de facto* student leaders, contending that those students were receiving undue attention and being rewarded for their misbehavior.

The Student Leadership Component

Rate of attendance and level of retention in a program are mediating variables in the success of a program. Retention and attendance rates of the *de facto* leaders were affected by their day-to-day experiences in and out of school. Half of the *de facto* leaders completed the program. Five students did not complete the school year, absent not only from the program but from the school as a whole. Average attendance of *de facto* leaders was six students.

We anticipated that work with the *de facto* leaders would be difficult. One of the main motivations for the Cornerstone Project was to bring those students back into the school community. For the *de facto* student leadership group, the administration chose those students who had the highest degree of school disengagement and had a high degree of influence over their peers. In retrospect, it appears that these criteria for selection made it very difficult to get work accomplished. Even the students recognized this when they would tell the facilitator that teachers had a difficult time working with them one at a time and, for this project, they had been brought all together, compounding the challenge of getting a task done.

Some days, discussion in the group meetings stayed focussed. On a positive day the facilitator wrote,

> I was very pleased today that the group could stay on task... and the task was not very demanding. They were discussing some of their thoughts and feelings about how to get along with teachers, and there was not a struggle as there was last time, and the time before, between staying on task and not staying on task (Notes of 2/16).

The facilitator tried different ways of working with the students to bring their attention back to the topic being discussed, such as appointing a taskmaster, setting an agenda, urging them to put their energies to good use for the group's sake. Some of the students came up with ideas of their own such as electing a president, a vice-president, and a secretary to attempt to create some order, volunteering as taskmasters, and establishing rules for those who missed meetings or arrived late.

Efforts to create social order to accomplish a task are indicators of the appreciation the *de facto* leaders had for the opportunity to voice their experiences in school and to be heard. This opportunity was unusual in the students' experience and they were concerned that the facilitator would not continue to support them; "you are going to give up on us, that is what everybody does", one student said. Building trust was a very slow process.

To a large degree, the attention span of the *de facto* student leaders was short, shifting quickly from one topic to the next, even when discussing issues that mattered greatly to them. On March 28, the facilitator reflected on his notes,

> What seems to be happening is that they get frustrated and bored because we are not accomplishing a whole lot and their attention span is real limited, they do not like to talk about anything for very long. They get bored and frustrated and their way of handling frustration is to further derail the group. They start joking or picking on someone or coming late or wanting to leave early..that then makes the group less productive which leads to more frustration and more of the same kind of disruptive ways of dealing with frustration.

The students had learned unproductive ways of getting away from doing things and they found it very difficult to unlearn those ingrained patterns of behavior. These students had learned how to disengage from school and be unreachable to the teachers. They discussed in earnest the signs that teachers should look for when students were trying to change behavior and become more productive students, such as not cutting class and turning in homework. Teachers, according to the students, "harass you when you want to be good." One of the *de facto* student leaders described his experience thus,

> When you're at school, you get [a] reputation. You either get a reputation as a goodie-good, or a reputation as a person who don't want any of our class...you got the ones who don't do their work for a certain teacher, so they [the teacher] tell every teacher, "He ain't going to do no work, or she ain't going to do no work." You know what I'm saying... the teachers are reacting to the reputation..they're not reacting to the students. And sometimes people try to turn themselves around..and the teacher don't want to know. Some teachers are like that...like you're mortal enemies.

Students did not interpret teachers' pressuring them to do more work and comply with class rules as an attempt to help them achieve academically. These students felt that the pressure was too strong and characterized it as harassment. This same student complained about a teacher telling him he had come to class with his supplies after he had not been in class for a long time,

> Come back the fourth quarter, go back there and try to go to class and stay out of trouble, you know, go in there and sit down, educational, you go in there and you've got your pencil and you've got your paper, and she say you ain't got your supplies...How are you supposed to have [supplies]? She tell me I ain't got no

> supplies. I just leave then, there ain't no need to keep coming back...There's no need for me to be writing...Something stupid, saying I should come to class with my supplies ...[as] if I was in first grade.

Having been far removed from the business of this class, this student saw showing up with paper and pencil, sitting down and listening as a big move, while the teacher interpreted it as below the minimum required to learn in her class. This disparity in perspectives was one of the topics of discussion at the professional development workshops.

The Professional Development Component

The professional development workshops provided a safe place for teachers to examine the gaps in the views about teaching and learning that existed between them and the students. It also helped them to see some of the ways in which they could reach out to students making an effort "to turn themselves around."

Teachers told us that one of the most valued experiences in the workshops was the opportunity to interact with peers. Schools are not built for cooperation; Talbert and McLaughlin (1994) have observed that the "privacy norms characteristic of the professions undermine the capacity for teacher learning and sustained professional commitment." The workshops were organized around teachers' expressed topics of interest and provided them the time and framework to exchange ideas, think, and learn together. Teachers commented favorably about "sharing information with colleagues," and "supporting and encouraging the success" of the "work of a peer."

The facilitator received high ratings for his ability to create a safe place for teachers to exchange views about teaching. Eight out of ten participants thought that he had encouraged group cohesiveness, trust, and responsiveness.

Project Coordination

The collaborative approach to planning and implementing the project that was used fostered excellent working relations between project and school staff. The principal, the assistant principal, and a core group of teachers were extremely supportive of the project, and took the time to meet with project staff to plan and coordinate the implementation of the project. Between February and June of 1995, project staff held weekly and bi-weekly meetings with the principal to coordinate program activities with school activities and to schedule and plan staff development workshops. At the same time, continuous two-way communication with the assistant principal ensured vital support for the project. Beginning in the fall of 1995, working around the busy schedule of the principal and the re-organization of the school, meetings were held with a core group of faculty. These regular meetings with the school's administration and with the faculty provided opportunities to discuss the process and immediate outcomes that were being observed.

Conclusions and Recommendations or Options to Build on the Project's Accomplishments

Based on what we learned by implementing the Cornerstone Project at Martin Luther King School, several steps were taken immediately and more can be taken in the future to build on the project's accomplishments. Taking advantage of the principal investigator's membership in the Cleveland Collaborators for Positive Education Network (CCPE), two steps were taken as soon as the project's timeline was completed.

First, cognizant of the value that students and staff place on outside resources to strengthen student-teacher relations, CCPE provided assistance in several school initiatives, such as the in-school suspension program and efforts at proposal development to fund faculty's ideas to enhance learning. Second, responding to the demand of a group of teachers for a more active participatory role in their professional development, the principal investigator supported teachers' action research on their own teaching.

In addition, in order to continue to be able to provide assistance to students, the school principal established a collaborative relationship with Case Western Reserve University's Mandel School of Applied Social Science as a placement site for interns. For one semester these interns worked with students at the school. The possibility of using Title I funds to hire a social worker is being explored, and finally, a close collaboration has been established between the Martin Luther King faculty and administration and the Urban Child Research Center encouraging a desire to transform MLK into a school that is responsive and open to the community, with a high degree of family involvement. Although the Cornerstone Project has been completed, many of its lessons continue to bear fruit.

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